

EAGLE
MORNING 106,641
EVENING 76,618
SUNDAY 123,192

MAY 7 1961

News Analysis

Should Press Help Keep Secrets?

From the Des Moines (Ia.) Register

WASHINGTON

The Kennedy administration had not been in office long when a policy took form to circumscribe the areas of public information on matters affecting the national security.

Information on current diplomatic negotiations, on certain defense activities, on the President's movements, and now on missile firing has been contained within stricter bounds. Now a new element has been introduced into discussion of the need for a kind of restriction on public information resembling the British official secrets act.

The trend of thinking of which the tone — not merely the newspapers, radio-TV and magazines — ought to be wary.

THE BRITISH official secrets act initially affects public servants in key positions who are required to sign statements that they will not divulge information in the course of their duties which would adversely affect British security. Those who conspire with them, such as a newspaper, to publish such information are also subject to prosecution.

Thus, a British newspaper which had obtained advance information from official sources and probably from any source on the Suez invasion a few years ago, and published it, might have been prosecuted.

If there were an American official secrets act, it might have been possible to prosecute newspapers which divulged that Cubans were being trained and equipped in the United States and elsewhere for an invasion of their island.

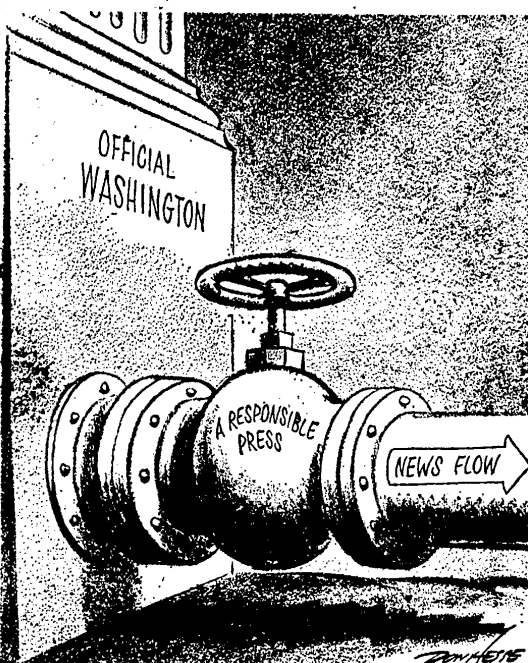
MANY OFFICIALS, and the President himself, appear to believe that publicity on cold war operations is a handicap. They recognize at the same time constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press and dangers involved in limiting that freedom.

During the Cuban preparations newspapers in Florida imposed upon themselves self-censorship to a certain degree. Papers outside Florida did not. After the invasion began the "defection" of Cuban pilots was exposed as a mere stratagem of the invasion, and thus did not have the desired effect of causing real defections, and creating the general atmosphere of revolt which was planned.

The desire of the administration to operate with more stealth in cold war operations raises many problems which do not exist when the U. S. is committed to war.

IN WORLD WAR II, it was possible to establish a "voluntary" press censorship with a code of conduct which worked well under the circumstances. A national commitment had been made to the war.

But this was not the case with the invasion of Cuba. No action was taken by Congress. Even "consultation" with Congress was sketchier than when President Truman sent American troops to Korea.



Let this be the only valve

Nor, in fact, after the Cuban invasion was any commitment made; to the contrary, the President announced that America would not intervene under any circumstances. In making this statement the President probably reflected an overwhelming popular feeling that more was to be lost than to be gained by crushing Castro through the ruthless use of American military power.

The fact probably must be faced that the methods undertaken by any administration in cold war military or paramilitary operations are likely to be controversial. As, for example, the U2 flights.

After Pearl Harbor we could have a quick national decision to go to war with Japan and Germany. But we have not had any such decision on intervening in Cuba or elsewhere in the Americas.

IT IS THE ABSENCE of this kind of national decision which makes it risky for the press to censor itself on cold war measures involving the risk of hot war. Without any national decision of a substantial kind, the press would thus be a silent partner to decisions made by the executive branch of the government. These decisions might not necessarily be the correct ones for the preservation of the security of the nation.

It simply cannot be reasoned away that a vital and essential American freedom will be circumscribed if agreement is reached that the press will cooperate with the government in keeping secret military or para-

military operations in the cold war.

THE QUESTION IS whether the limitation of this freedom is essential to the security of the nation. If it is essential, then the cold war will have forced upon us a more authoritarian government, and other limitations or controls would be likely to follow.

Cuba is probably a poor example to rely on for arguments that the press ought to cooperate in keeping dark the nefarious workings of the CIA in its undercover war with Communism.

Castro certainly knew as much of the preparations going on in Florida, Louisiana, Nicaragua and Guatemala as the American press. His agents were busy daily in the Cuban press that the invasion planning was under way.

He seemed also to know where the invasion forces would land, which was more than the American press published in advance.

THEREFORE officials have chosen an uncomfortable time to discuss once again some kind of a voluntary press censorship, or even an official secrets act. It looks too much as if they are trying to divert attention from their own mistakes by drawing broad "lessons" from the Cuban flop.

It may be in the end, however, that the conflict with the Soviet Union will have to be recognized as the modern version of war. If so, then let it be recognized as such by virtue of a national decision which includes Congress and the public.

The Formosa defense and the Middle East defense resolutions adopted in Congress are examples of the kind of decisions which can be made in the cold war after public discussion and congressional debate.